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The Misunderstood Gender: A Model of Modern Femme Identity

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Femme identity remains a highly controversial topic. It has been maligned in both heterosexual and queer contexts, and is rarely represented in empirical literature. In this study we examined how femme women experience their own gender identity. Interviews were conducted with femme-identified lesbians; the focus was upon 4 content areas: identity development, experiences in the lesbian community, heterosexual society, and romantic relationships. The interviews were analyzed using Grounded Theory (B. J. Glaser & A. Strauss, 1967), an empirical method of generating models of subjective phenomena. The core category in this model "Maintaining integrity: Upholding beliefs about sexual desire and gender representation" reflects the need to uphold their sense of integrity across a variety of contexts by confronting stereotypes about both women and lesbians.

KEY WORDS: femme; lesbian; gender; homosexual; transgender; queer; identity.

Butch–Femme History

Butch and femme lesbian genders first became visible in the United States in the late 1940s as bars allowed women to congregate without male escorts (Faderman, 1991). Butch women's more masculine clothing and short hair conflicted starkly with feminine norms at the time, and femme women exaggerated femininity and became known for their bright lipstick and seductive dress. Femme–butch couples resembled popular media images of heterosexual gender in the culture of that time, and increased public awareness of lesbianism through their discernable gender representation.

By the 1950s, it was imperative for a woman to identify as either femme or butch if she wanted to become integrated into this lesbian culture. At that time, these two genders "were the key structure for organizing against heterosexual dominance" (Lapovsky-Kennedy & Davis, 1993, p. 6). This gendering cast butch women as protectors and aggressors and femmes as seductresses and sources of emotional solace within a community geared for resistance. It offered a needed sense of belonging that helped to fortify the women against the harassments and arrests that were common at the time—as well as offering a system of coupling that structured romantic pairing, in much the same way as physical sex does within heterosexual contexts.

Although to the outside world lesbians appeared to be mocking heterosexuality, femme–butch identities were very complex, and transcended and radicalized traditional gender roles (e.g., Feinberg, 1996). By appropriating the signs of masculinity, butch gender stretched the image of what it can mean to be a woman. Similarly, femme women gave feminine signifiers new meaning (Ruby, 1993). By orienting their sexuality toward a butch woman instead of a man, the femme women made lesbian desire public and challenged notions of female sexuality.

Although there were some similarities, relationships between women and men in the heterosexual community were transformed in the femme–butch

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relationship, as femme characteristics were not considered inferior but were granted respect and admiration (Laporte, 1992). Instead of being cast in the traditional feminine stereotype as weak or passive, they were known to be rebellious and courageous women—as they took the risks of being seen publicly in the company of butch women and being caught in bar raids that could compromise both their employment and physical security. Also, as femmes sometimes had to support financially butch partners who had difficulty maintaining employment because of their masculine appearance (Faderman, 1991), their relationships had an economic basis characterized by greater equality than those of most heterosexual couples of that era.

Sexuality within butch–femme relationships was not based upon heterosexual sexuality (Lapovsky-Kennedy & Davis, 1993). The central focus of sexual relations was the femme partner's pleasure, as often a butch partner would not expect nor wish reciprocity and would receive satisfaction from the act of pleasuring. "Butch–femme was an erotic partnership serving both as a conspicuous flag of rebellion and as an intimate exploration of women's sexuality" (Nestle, 1993, p. 107).

By the late 1960s, however, feminism was emerging, and it brought with it a shift in gender politics. Feminists, who desired to escape the constraints of gender, rejected butch–femme genders and embraced androgyny (Harris & Crocker, 1997). Feminists accused butch women of adopting male privilege and femme women of encouraging the patriarchal objectification of women. Nestle (1993) wrote that "We Lesbians from the fifties made a mistake in the early seventies; we allowed our lives to be trivialized and reinterpreted by feminists who did not share our culture" (p. 110). By the early 1980s attitudes had begun to change again, as women began to reclaim butch and femme identities. Yet as postfeminist lesbians reclaimed femme or butch identities, these roles developed new meanings. No longer a social necessity, claiming femme or butch roles became purely an act of self-definition in this decade, and these identities emerged into different social contexts.

Femme Literature

Although femmes and butches together formed the basis of the lesbian community in the 1950s, more public attention has been focused on butch identity, particularly as transgendered issues have come to the forefront of gender studies (e.g., Burana & Due, 1994; Halberstam, 1998; Hale, 1998). Femme identity has a history of being positioned as a complement of butch identity—to the chagrin of women who claim independent identities. Over the last decade, however, discussion of femme identity in its own right has increased as collections of theoretical and fictional essays from femme writers have come forth (see Harris & Crocker, 1997; Munt, 1998; Nestle, 1992; Newman, 1995).

These writings describe a diverse set of femme experiences, although some common themes seem to exist. Some authors defended femme identity as it is experienced as "so looked down on—especially in a [feminist] political community" (Austin, 1992, p. 363). They attempted to differentiate stereotypical, passive femininity from femme-inity and to respond to claims that androgyny is the only way to challenge patriarchy (e.g., Harris & Crocker, 1997; Nestle, 1992). Repeatedly, they asserted that femmes are "real" lesbians, and that their gender expression is not an attempt to pass as heterosexual (e.g., Newman, 1995).

The empirical studies of lesbian experience, however, rarely reflect the existence of femme women. Only a handful of studies have been done on femme identity—even fewer within the field of psychology. Bailey, Kim, Hills, and Linsenmeier (1997), Smith and Stillman (2002) examined the tendency to specify femininity as a desired trait in lesbian personal advertisements (although not necessarily femme identity). Singh, Vidaurri, Zambarano, and Dabbs (1999) surveyed lesbian partners, and reported that the partner described to be more femme tended to be more gender typical having, such as a more feminine body shape and a stronger desire to give birth. Within lesbian relationships, partners seen as "more femme" tended to have lower levels of testosterone than "more butch" partners (Pearcey, Docherty, & Dabbs, 1996; Singh et al., 1999).

Levitt and Horne (2002) conducted a survey of queer women, and found that femme-identified women realized their sexual orientation at a much later age (22) than butch women (15) and significantly later than they realized their own preference for a feminine gender expression. Although traditionally this culture was associated with the working class (Weber, 1996), they found evidence to suggest that class divisions may be fading today. Levitt and Horne also suggested that femme women experience less discrimination than butch women, and they indicated that gender expression was more important to butch and femme-identified women than androgynous or

"other" women when forming romantic relationships. Regardless of their gender expression, on average, all participants viewed both butch and femme identities as positive for both the community and the women themselves.

These studies add to the literature by researchers such as Kitzinger (1987) that distinguishes types of lesbian experience from one another. They inform readers about differences between groups that can allow for a more complex understanding of lesbian culture. They also point to the importance of gender within many lesbian communities. This body of research is just beginning, however, and many questions remain. This study was conducted to shed light upon the motivations to claim a femme identity and the meanings that it can hold.

Study Objectives

The purpose of this study was to develop an empirical model of femme-identity that is founded upon contemporary femme lesbians' descriptions of their own identities and experiences. Through the interpretation of exploratory interviews, we allowed participants to describe their construal of self and to communicate its complexity. We began this study to develop an understanding of how femme lesbians within a contemporary butch–femme community made sense of this gender category and to better understand how women reconciled feminist concerns about objectification within their own identities.

METHOD

Participants

As femme gender is rooted within unique lesbian contexts, it can be difficult to understand this construct without reference to specific butch–femme subcultures. The participants in this study were members of a lesbian community in Northern Florida. This community can be considered a lesbian separatist community to the extent that community activities (offered throughout each week) were open to women only, and it was assumed by the community that participating members identified as lesbian. Demographic information is presented in Table I. Twelve participants were drawn from a lesbian community that was dominantly made up of White women, and the composite of participants interviewed reflected this demographic.

Table I. Participant Demographics

Age	Years in community	Relational status	Ethnicity	Occupation
34	27	In relationship	White	Cosmetologist
25	03	Single	White	Scientist
27	02	In relationship	White	Interior decorator
39	08	In relationship	White	Painter
47	07	In relationship	White	Massage therapist
53	34	In relationship	White	Speech pathologist
41	05	In relationship	White	Health technician
34	28	Single	White	Health policy
33	05	Single	White	Mental health
34	04	Single	White	Graduate student
36	20	Single	White	Realtor
21	04	In relationship	White	Student

Note. Demographics are not listed in the order that they appear following quotes in this paper, in order to protect anonymity.

Participants varied in terms of their relationship status, age (range of 21–53 years), and length of time in the community (range of 2–34 years). Diversity in participant characteristics is a strength of grounded theory approaches wherein researchers seek to diversify sources of information in the service of developing results that are as rich and encompassing as possible (see Patton's principle of maximal variation; Patton, 1990). Advertisements were placed within the lesbian community newsletter to recruit interviewees who self-identified as femme. In addition, snowball recruitment occurred as some interviewees referred other participants to the project.

Interviews

The central question of the interview was: "What does it mean to you to be femme?" Prompts encouraged the women to describe the ways they experienced their identities within mainstream society, lesbian community, and romantic relationships. An exploratory style of interviewing was adopted; utilizing open ended questions and nonbiasing prompts. All interviews were conducted by the first author, who had been part of this community for approximately 1 year at the time and, as such, could bring an ethnographic experience to the hermeneutic interpretation of data. Interviews ranged from 1 to 3 hr in length.

Because the interviewer and the participants socialized within the same community, there was concern that the interview might create a potential imbalance in power as the interviewer would have access to personal information about participants at any future community meetings. Guided by a feminist ethic, the interviewer allowed participants to ask her about her

gender experience at the end of the interviews. This exchange equalized the power within the data collection process and allowed for the mutual experience of learning. The less formal exchange also allowed the interviewer to develop a deeper sense of the participants' understanding of gender through the contrast and similarities in experiences discussed.

Grounded Theory Analysis

The analysis was conducted using grounded theory. This inductive approach allows investigators to compare units of interview transcript in order to identify and organize the common themes present. This method has been advanced in psychological research as a way to explore subjective experience and facilitate the development of theories (see Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988).

First, transcripts of the interview were divided into "meaning units," each of which expresses one idea (see Giorgi, 1970). Each unit was assigned a label that described the idea. Units were grouped into categories by using a process of constant comparison in which each label is compared with every other label. Categories were then compared to one another in a similar fashion, and higher order categories were created. These higher order categories were then compared and grouped, and in this way the process continued until one core category was created that reflected a concept that is central to the phenomenon. This analysis resulted in the creation of a hierarchical model.

Research notes were recorded throughout the analytical process to document shifts in hypotheses in an attempt to bracket theories that develop during the analysis, and so they did not influence the data sorting. Data collection was halted when saturation was reached, that is when additional categories do not appear to be forthcoming despite the analysis of new data. In this analysis, the last three transcripts did not add new categories to the hierarchy, and so the model was considered to be saturated after nine transcripts.

Credibility Checks

Three checks were conducted to increase the credibility of the results. First, at the end of each interview, all participants were asked to reflect upon the process of the interview. They considered whether they would have said anything different to an interviewer with other demographic characteristics (e.g., an interviewer who was butch, Latina, or older) or whether they could envision questions that were not asked that would help elucidate their gender experience. Any information that was shared in response to these questions was incorporated into the hierarchy in order to reduce possible constraining effects of the interviewing context. Participants reported that they had shared their own experiences thoroughly, and said that they would not have been as forthcoming with an interviewer from outside the community. Two women doubted that their experience would be comprehended or well received by readers who might think that butch–femme was "un-PC."

The process of consensus between researchers strengthened the claim of credibility. While the analysis of this project was under way, the researchers met weekly for a period of 1 year to discuss the generation of categories and the labeling of concepts. The researchers offered different perspectives to this process of analysis: one is a femme-identified lesbian who had experience living in the community in question and interviewing the women, one does not identify as either butch or femme, and the other is a butch-identified lesbian. Although we took care to restrict the ways our individual biases and personal experiences might bring foreclosure to the process of conceptualization, it is congruent with a hermeneutic method to relate our research notes and interpersonal experiences to the phenomenon at hand as checks to maximize the thoroughness of the model after its conceptualization.

After the model was complete, the first author returned to the community and met with three women there (one butch-identified participant, one femme-identified, and one androgynous-identified woman) in order to seek feedback on the results of the study. The women all strongly endorsed the model and believed that it described their personal experiences of femme women. The femme consultant endorsed the core category with enthusiasm, and particularly appreciated the ways results of this study related to another similar study of butch experience (Levitt & Hiestand, 2002).

RESULTS

Femme as Essential Within Two Fluid Continua

Participants discussed heterosexuality–homosexuality and butch–femme as two continua, upon which women could be positioned at any point (see Table II). In general, participants thought that

Table II. Femme as Essential Within Two Fluid Continua

Categories	N^a	Subcategories
Homosexuality and butch–femme are continuous	7	No subcategories
Has had unfulfilling experiences with men	7	Has never wanted to be a man; has had negative experiences with men; made an educated choice to be a lesbian after abuse from men
Femme as essential or innate	11	Has always been femme; femme is who she is; being butch or femme is innate
Overall endorsement	12	

[a]Number of participants who contributed meaning units to this category.

one's location along these continua was central to the self, because of either early development or genetics. Accordingly, femmeness was experienced as an essential quality, if not an innate one.

Still, for most of the women interviewed, learning about their gender and sexuality was a continual process. All but one of the participants had a sexual and/or romantic history with men before she came out, and two had been married. Some of the interviewees reported having had unsatisfactory experiences with men in the past; most had dated men but never felt as comfortable or as happy as they felt with women. "I think some people are just born knowing, "God, I must be gay!" (laughs) And some people like me . . . probably have dated men most of my life, but I'm not as happy dating men . . . and I'm perfectly comfortable with that. It's an educated choice" (P-02).

The degree of distress in dating or being sexual with men differed between the women, as evidenced by another participant's description of her need to become intoxicated before being sexual with men. "I had sex with a lot of men and convinced myself that I was straight, but it never fit. It just never made any sense. I couldn't really stand to be with them, you know. I mean, once I sobered up in the morning, I'd be out of there" (P-07). The women did not believe that these experiences determined their lesbianism but they provided confirmation that their sexual orientation was lesbian and that they would be happier with female partners.

Femme as a Lesbian Label That Should Not Be Prescriptive

The word *femme* was challenging to operationalize. Women said that lesbian gender needed to be "re-languaged," and they were concerned that femme is misunderstood as "not-butch" or as "not-typically-lesbian." For them, the label evoked a strong, positive image of feminine sexuality (see Table III). "To me, femme is probably the word that evokes the powerful vitality of sexuality of the feminine flavor, rather than the "Ooh, isn't she sweet" or "Ooh, isn't she kind of slutty," which are the derogatory ways to be feminine and sexy. [Instead] it's a really powerful way to be sexy" (P-08). Femme was valued as a uniquely lesbian construct that could only be understood fully within a lesbian culture and vernacular.

Table III. Femme as a Lesbian Label That Should Not Be Prescriptive

Categories	N^a	Subcategories
Femme label as being positive or useful	11	People like having a construct that can describe experiences; being called femme opens up my experience of myself as lesbian; being femme fits my sense of self, feels happier; believes that the label femme describes certain patterns; identifying as femme was useful because it explained some interactions
Difficulties with the label *femme* when it is prescribing or superficial	11	Labels can be used to describe specific traits within overall general; butch–femme is extremely challenging to describe; being labeled as femme is often based upon your appearance alone; hesitant to use the label femme if it seems prescriptive; sometimes disagrees on what femme is
Butch–femme as uniquely lesbian constructs	8	Femme has different meaning in lesbian vs. popular culture; butch–femme do not correspond to male–female
There is not a language to describe femme	6	Being femme misunderstood as not lesbian; need to create a new language for femme experience; femme evokes a positive image of powerful females
Overall endorsement	12	

[a]Number of participants who contributed meaning units to this category.

This label was thought to have several purposes. It helped women to describe their experiences, to identify patterns that validated their experiences, and to make sense of themselves within the lesbian community. It allowed them to reconcile their "femininity" with their feminism and lesbian identity. Some women expressed hesitations about the label,

however, when it was unclear what meaning was attributed to the word in a given context, when it was based upon appearances alone, or when it was used prescriptively in a way that confined or limited what a femme woman could be.

Developmental Process of Becoming Femme

Four major stages emerged from participants' recounting of the development of their femme identity (see Table IV). First, women relayed childhood memories that included the mixing of masculine and feminine stereotypes: being a tomboy as a child but then becoming feminine as a teenager, having homosexual feelings or experiences despite dating men, and being athletic but feminine in high school.

Second, women described their process of coming out as lesbian as complicated by their femme gender, which conflicted with both butch stereotypes of lesbians and the feminine images of female beauty. Because images of masculine women are so stigmatized in our culture, some women described struggling to understand their attraction to others—dating men, trying to be butch, or trying to be attracted to femme women—before they could recognize and accept their own attraction.

> I didn't feel like I was lesbian. I didn't feel like I was heterosexual either . . . I said, "I don't want to have it [sex] with men anymore and [am] not feeling drawn to images of women that I see . . . ." That kind of [glamorous] woman didn't turn me on. I would not want to make love with a person that looked like that, but I did not want to make love with men either. So I didn't know what I was. (P-05)

Despite the difficulty in naming their sexual orientation, the participants thought that their youths were easier than butch women's childhoods, as they were not aware of their sexual orientations or gender differences until later.

> Butch lesbians that I know work towards that feeling . . . "It's my birth right to be here and not be oppressed" . . . . The courage and strength that it took for them to do that is incredible. . . . [They] were damaged by holding secrets, by being oppressed, feeling like you're the only one in the world. . . . It just blows me away. I've never had that feeling. By the time I started, you know, really naming what I was, there were, you know, lots of other lesbians I could go to. I didn't have to do that all by myself. They did. (P-06)

Still, at the same time as they saw butch childhoods as characterized by isolation, they also described being envious of butch women for knowing who they were earlier. "I feel like I was damaged by my heterosexual relationships . . . just the damage that comes from not knowing who you really are and always having this little "not-being-happy," you know . . . yearning, wanting to find a home when there wasn't one" (P-06).

After an awareness of their lesbian orientation developed, women reported experiencing a need to come out as lesbian, despite reactions from others that ranged from surprise (because their femininity conflicted with prevailing stereotypes of lesbians) to discomfort. This need for honesty was promoted by a strong sense of personal sincerity and integrity and the political motivation to challenge homophobia.

Usually, it was in or after their entrance into lesbian culture that women learned about butch–femme culture. On the whole, the participants described experiences of relief, excitement, and belonging, although some first had to overcome previous

Table IV. Developmental Process of Becoming Femme

Categories	N^a	Subcategories
Memories of growing up femme: combining male and female gender traits	7	She was a tomboy as a child; sexual experiences or feelings during childhood; she began to dress more femininely in high school; she was more athletic in high school
Coming out as lesbian	12	Time of coming out differs; reactions for coming out range from discomfort to surprise; reasons for coming out include sincerity and political motivation; harder to come out to self as femme; coming out as confusing and scary
Learning about butch–Femme	11	Deciding to explore butch–femme culture; discovering butch–femme culture: overcoming previous ideas; ways of understanding butch–femme culture
Coming out as femme	12	Coming out as femme as a scary identifying as process; identification came at different points for different women; reasons for identifying as femme; resistant and estranged reactions from others when came out as femme
Overall endorsement	12	

[a]Number of participants who contributed meaning units to this category.

ideas about butch–femme (e.g., that these identities no longer existed or that being femme was weak or passive). "The first person that ever said anything to me about it . . . she said, "I am not going to cut off my hair. I'm not going to dress this way or that way. I'm just going to be a femme, like I am." And I was so relieved. I was like, "Oh, thank god!" (P-09). They sought to understand butch–femme concepts through reading and by gradually contrasting and distinguishing butch–femme genders from heterosexual masculine–feminine genders.

Finally, the participants described the process of coming out as femme. The challenges in reconciling their gender with expected lesbian androgyny made it more difficult for them to self-identify as lesbian. Those women who did not initially identify as femme, however, faced a second process of coming out, which could be uncomfortable. "A few of them [friends] questioned me, "No, you're not femme." I can understand their reasoning. I mean, they'd seen me in the trenches a lot. And so they would identify me as butch . . . " (P-05).

Once femme-identified, they still had to negotiate acceptance in communities that most often were characterized by androgynous and butch members. Identifying as femme helped them to resist the pressures to adopt these dominant gender presentations and accept themselves as both feminine and lesbian. Affiliation with butch–femme community gave them a sense of desirability and connection with others who valued gender diversity. "I was so freed up to be all that I was. I didn't have to hold back anymore. When I was trying to operate in the straight world . . . I always felt I had to hold back. I always felt unsafe, like there'd be repercussions for being all that I was, for being as strong as I was, as truthful as I was, as honest as I was" (P-07). The women described a joy in being able to be aesthetically and sexually expressive in the manner in which they were most comfortable, while still being able to take pride in a lesbian identity.

Enacting Femmeness: The Components of Being Femme

Although there were exceptions to all rules, interviewees described femmes as having a general appreciation and identification with a feminine aesthetic quality, often associated with makeup, feminine clothing, and dressing provocatively (see Table V). They described feeling most comfortable and sensual in this style. Interviewees said they were most commonly identified by their appearances or in contrast to butch partners. Both of these methods could be disturbing, as they negated the validity of their gender in its own right and ignored important values they associated with femmeness. They ascribed to femme identity the traits of strength, openness, and honesty that were neither necessary aspects nor common associations with heterosexual femininity.

Some participants described a process of self-examination to ensure that their enactments of femmeness differed from the heterosexual emphasis on women's appearance and did not result from a desire to pass as heterosexual or attract heterosexual attention. One woman described this process of questioning as follow:

Table V. Enacting Femmeness—Components of Femmeness

Categories	N^a	Subcategories
Exceptions exist to any rule	12	Femme energy is expressed differently, from lesbian to lesbian; one can be being feminine but not femme; appearance is not reflective of her personality; femme roles as individual; femmes with masculine characteristics
Aesthetic images of being femme	12	Has always looked femme because she feels happy/comfortable that way; being femme as presentation of self co-constructed with others; femme images; femininity as a sign of being femme; butch–femme is based on appearance
Femmes enacting femininity as having different meanings from straight women	7	Had to reexamine her reasons for looking femme; being femme in a way different from straight women
Femme archetype having certain interests	7	Chose hobbies based on how feminine they seemed; butch–femme is about exterior behaviors like male–female archetypes
The role of role-playing	9	Role-playing is secondary; butch–femme as a form of play; sometimes she and her partner step out of their roles; roles are not strict and are shaped by partners
Overall endorsement	12	

[a]Number of participants who contributed meaning units to this category.

> "Who am I putting my makeup on for? Am I doing it for men and society?" And I had to deal with that. I had to look at that. Say, "What makes me who I am?" and "Why do I still wear high heels?" . . . . I realized that it makes *me* very happy and comfortable. I love looking feminine . . . . I love being a woman and I'm very proud of that and I'm going to accentuate every little curve. (P-02)

Some women described being femme as a lesbian archetype that has associated behaviors and interests that communicated and resulted from their sexual and gender orientation. Although they thought that exaggeration or role playing could be a form of play between butch and femme partners, this meaning was secondary. In serious interactions, the butch and femme identities were not roles but identities that had flexibility and could be shaped by partners.

Social Relationships: Balancing Equality and Difference

In the interviews, women discussed their femme identities as influencing their friendships and romantic relationship within lesbian community and culture. They also reported that it affected their interactions within heterosexual contexts (see Table VI).

Lesbian Contexts: Acceptance and Pressures

Within the lesbian community at hand, most femmes interviewed said that their lesbian- gender was accepted and embraced and that acceptance of femmes was growing across lesbian communities. They thought that when femmeness was not accepted within a lesbian context, it was because of either the misinterpretation of the meaning of being femme or a limited definition of lesbianism. Indeed, many participants had been accused by other lesbians of not being political, out, or lesbian "enough." They were concerned that being "lesbian" was made equivalent to being butch or androgynous so as to marginalize femme women.

One woman described a particularly harsh rejection from one lesbian community and the aftermath of her ensuing rape by one of its members.

> I was called a "tourist" and not taken seriously for years . . . [I was] being called a "tourist" when that whole thing went down with that violence. Automatically . . . people who were very feminist were saying things like, "Well, look at what you were wearing, I mean you were wearing this little dress," and, "Look at the messages you give off." And I was like, "What? That I want to be raped? That I want to be beaten? Is that what a dress gives off?" . . . [They] would never say that to a straight woman." (P-07)

Table VI. Social Relationships: Balancing Equality and Difference

Categories	N^a	Subcategories
Social relationships within lesbian community: acceptance and pressures	12	Relations within lesbian community: acceptance and pressures; femme friendships with other lesbian genders
Romantic relationships: equality but difference	12	Butch–femme as sexual energies in interaction; dating preferences re: butch–femme: most believe that butches and femmes attract each other; power in femme–butch relationships is more equal; butches as being more defended emotionally
Femme sexuality: A strong and positive tension charged by differences	12	Flirting, sexual initiation, and sexual tension; being femme as an inherently sexual statement; butch–femme sexual interactions: heightening gender differences; femme perceptions of butches' physicality
Lesbian culture reclaiming butch–femme identity anew	12	In the mid-to-late 1980s, butch–femme started being talked about again; butch–femme being rejected in the 1970s–1980s or under liberal feminism; butch–femme as becoming more mainstream in lesbian culture; butch–femme as working or lower class; in mid-1980s lesbians began reclaiming butch–femme in new terms
Relations within straight culture: discrimination and difficulties	12	Discrimination for being femme; difficulties relating to straight women; Difficulties relating to straight men; feeling safer from male power dynamics or abuse as femmes
Overall endorsement	12	

[a]Number of participants who contributed meaning units to this category.

Lesbians who were not in a butch–femme culture judged her as aberrantly sexualized when she dressed in ways that were expected only of heterosexual women.

In addition to this expectation that "real" lesbians should be butch or androgynous, they also described expectations that a femme's romantic partner should be butch and that a femme's interests

should be dominated by feminine activities. Although many of the women reported enjoying feminine activities, stereotypes about femme interests misrepresented the diversity of their interests and talents. All but one participant reported a principal attraction to butch women. They relayed an openness in modern-day butch–femme communities to femme–femme (or butch–butch) dating, however the expectation of butch–femme attraction structured many social interactions and at times could be constraining. "It's a little easier to relate to other femme women. I guess I don't feel as threatened . . . Butch women, I guess . . . have more expectations as far as what a lesbian is supposed to be like.. before they really take you seriously" (P-02).

Most interviewees cherished their sense of connection with other femmes and said that common experiences and interests were mutually validating. "The energy we exchanged has to do with almost celebrating our girliness" (P-01). Two women, however, did not share this experience. One younger woman was relatively new to the community and did not know other femme lesbians, and the other experienced a sense of competition with femmes that she disliked.

Friendships with androgynous women were comfortable, and participants appreciated androgyny as an aesthetic style. They saw butch friendships as potentially complicated because of the sexual energy that could exist, and they talked about the importance of monitoring and openly discussing sexual tension. Participants admired butch women for their bravery in maintaining their own gender expression despite the regular experiences of discrimination, and sought to support butch women's struggles.

They contrasted friendship behaviors: they described femme nurturing as providing emotional care and supportive confrontation and butch nurturing as oriented toward protection and providing assistance. "If I'm really depressed . . . I want to be held and patted on the back by my [butch] girlfriend or a butch friend—as in an "I'll protect you' kind of way . . . but I would give all the dirty details to my good femme friend . . . I'd want to rehash and rehash the story with her" (P-08). Forms of nurturance were discussed as related to the interests and interactional styles of the different genders, and neither form was privileged over the other.

Romantic Relationships: Equal but Different

Throughout the interviews, butch and femme were described as sexual "energies" that characterize women. This metaphor was used frequently in descriptions of butch–femme flirting or romance—as energies that were "charged," "interacting," or "building."

> Her energy feels very different from mine, but they interact real good together . . . I just really notice that when I'm around women who are into their power [or identities] as butches, that I feel that energy and it gives me a charge. It makes me feel good inside, you know? Not necessarily like I'm crushed out on every butch, but I just really love butches, and I really like being around that energy (P-07).

Although most of the women interviewed were primarily attracted to butch women, some women reported feeling attraction to forms of "opposition" that were not based on lesbian gender but on another form of personality or behavior. Within these flirtations or relationships, however, women talked about maximizing existing gender differences to heighten their romantic attraction. When dating other femmes, some participants said that they would take on some "butch" qualities so that this tension could be maintained. With butch partners, women exaggerated differences in order to communicate respect for their partners' gender. "I just let my girlfriend be as male as she wants to be . . . I don't mind . . . I'm like that with her because she's more comfortable—and, she will go to that [more vulnerable] place sometimes" (P-03). As butch women rarely have their genders recognized by others, signaling an awareness of gender difference allowed for a deeper level of connection and safety within the relationship.

Femmes described the power in their romantic relationships as being much more equal than in their own, or observed, heterosexual relationships. They said that housekeeping duties were divided more in accordance with personal preference than along gender lines. Also, they thought that divisions based on lesbian gender were not oppressive for femmes in the way male power could be for women.

> You can compare them [butch–femme interactions] with heterosexual ways, but they aren't heterosexual ways. Because there's more of an equality between women and an emotional base that's common to women . . .. Some of the sexism pieces are missing, you know. Because a butch, a butch lesbian doesn't really have the real power in the world and never has . . . never was raised that way (P-05).

Butch partners were thought to need more defenses and to be "tougher" than femmes, both to cope with the daily discrimination they face and to fit into butch culture. As a result, the femme

women understood them as being necessarily more emotionally guarded and comprehended their difficulty feeling comfortable with intimate relationships. "Women, especially life long butch women who have always known they were lesbian . . . they've had a much harder life . . . they often are a lot more stiff and rigid because of defenses that they've put up over the years" (P-08). By and large, they respected butch partners' protection needs, which they described in terms of greater emotional rigidity and a slower process of becoming emotionally expressive, trusting, and interdependent. Some participants relayed struggles with resultant relationship issues, which stemmed from the conflict between wanting to increase intimacy, yet wanting to respect a butch partner's need for safety.

Femme Sexuality: Strengthening the Tension of Difference

Similarly, many femmes interviewed thought that the lack of recognition or valuing of butch gender in mainstream culture created particular emotional vulnerability for butch partners during sexual interactions. During this time, femme women communicated respect for their partners' butch gender identity by valuing their partner's butch qualities over their feminine qualities. Strategies they used included heightening their gender differences so as to emphasize a partner's butchness, focusing caresses on body parts that were common to both men and women (e.g., shoulders, arms), or using fantasy or SM to make touch more comfortable. Respondents presented themselves within an emphatically feminine aesthetic during sexual interactions, for instance, by wearing lingerie. At times, they reported sexuality to be a difficult process of negotiation, as they could be unsure how to please their partners sexually without making them feel too feminine and negating their butch identities.

An identification as femme itself was a statement about sexuality for some. They described opposition as erotically compelling; however, opposition was defined within a lesbian context. None of the women interviewed confused "butchness" with "masculinity," instead, they valued and eroticized their partners' uniquely butch gender. They identified traits such as haircuts, body language, and piercings, among other butch gender signifiers. Although some participants were resistant to the idea of dating butch partners who pass as male regularly or who were transitioning to become men, others were more accepting—seeing these partners as transgendered instead of as men.

Many participants enjoyed being admired physically and being the primary recipient of physical pleasure. There were mixed responses about femme initiation and aggression; some women thought that flirting to invite advances, then allowing butch women to initiate sexual behavior, was typical of being femme, but other women reported initiating sex as well. Both "top" and "bottom" roles were described.

The meaning of being sexually receptive or "bottoming" was experienced as strikingly different within a butch–femme context than within a heterosexual context.

> I don't feel like I'm invoking all the historical oppression against women and feeling truly degraded or something, by having a surrendering moment or by dressing up on a butch's arm for the evening. I can get into that and find the excitement and sexiness of that and sort of get off on being an ornament or something. It would just feel completely different if I were on a man's arm. (P-08)

Women cited many other reasons for this distinction, including the relative physical, social, and economic equality between two women, shared feminist beliefs, and their desire to be sensitive to butch women's repeated experiences of discrimination and invisibility. By proffering symbols of femininity, the femme women enjoyed being appreciated as objects of beauty, and consciously allowed partners to claim symbols of power that affirmed their own marginalized gender identity.

Lesbian Culture: Reclaiming Femme Identity

Those interviewees who had longstanding identities as femme shared their experiences of changes in femme-identity within lesbian culture. They talked about the rejection of butch–femme by liberal feminism in the 1970s. Within these contexts, some of the participants described their own misunderstandings of femme identity as subordination. "There was this blooming feminist in me that was like, "I wouldn't bow down to a man. Why should I bow down to a woman?" I saw it [femmeness] as a weakness" (P-11). Participants described their own experience of reclaiming this identity and the importance of femme icons in that process. They described this reemergence of "femmes" as transformed by the feminist consciousness that now pervades

lesbian culture. They examined the meaning of being femme in butch–femme discussion groups within their community and rid it of connotations of weakness. Although still known to be the object of disapproval in some lesbian communities, femme and butch identities were seen to be gaining acceptance and becoming more fluid and less rule-bound. Lesbian community at present was described as evolving and "validating this particular part of lesbian culture" (P-06).

Heterosexual Contexts: Discrimination and Difficulties

The women described their heterosexual relationships as being influenced by their gender in a number of ways. Participants reported that relationships with men were complicated by the common assumption that lesbians dislike men, which resulted in defensiveness or distance from men. Also, as they did not fit mainstream cultural stereotyped images of lesbians, they are approached by interested men and have to negotiate refusals.

As the participants' gender did not allow them to relate to men as "one of the guys,"—in the way butch women can at times—they were expected to relate to men as heterosexual women or as potential objects of desire. They described actively resisting flirtatious, subordinate, apologetic, mothering, or conciliatory roles that are often expected of feminine women and are associated with positions of lesser power.

> I got pretty severely punished by men for being how I was . . . . They definitely responded to me differently than they did to your typical straight female because I was like "head on" all the time . . . . [I was] not holding their dicks and confronting them at the same time, which is that tight rope that I see straight women walk on all the time, and I just never walked it . . . . [I was] mostly called too assertive, or too aggressive, crazy, overemotional, too personally involved in the subject. All those things that are just really about not being willing to lie. (P-07)

Some of the participants described feeling safer from these gendered dynamics within the lesbian community, and limiting their interactions with men to avoid power struggles. It was important to the participants to act in accordance with their beliefs that they should not adopt a passive position when interacting within heterosexual contexts.

Table VII. Being Femme Is Inherently Political

Categories	N^a	Subcategories
To fight femme phobia in lesbian community	7	Believes it is important to be political and active in community; femmes coming out as femmes helps fight femmephobia
Indicates commitment to live one's life with integrity vs. the status quo	10	Being strong enough to be yourself; standing by your politics and coming out as femme; challenging the status quo; she is not going to change her appearance and society must accept her or not
To educate others and fight homophobia within heterosexual world	11	Being visible as femme is important and difficult; it is easier to break down prejudices as femme; she likes educating people about lesbians and broader stereotypes; subversive to be out with a passing butch
Overall endorsement	12	

[a]Number of participants who contributed meaning units to this category.

Being Femme Is Inherently Political

For many of the women, being femme was inherently political (see Table VII). Their consciousness about their femme and lesbian identities empowered them to speak out when they thought that their status as lesbian was not recognized. Participants actively confronted femmephobia in the lesbian community by refusing to stand for "femme-bashing" and by pointing out stereotypes and images of lesbians that excluded their experience. For instance, they contested hypotheses that boyish-looking women were lesbian, by pointing out that a feminine-looking woman could be as well. They said that femmes needed to come out as often as possible, within and outside of the lesbian community, so that they would become more visible.

Outside the lesbian community, coming out was a continual process for femmes, as they usually were assumed to be heterosexual. Unlike butch women whom they believed were identified more often as lesbian by appearance, femmes who were politically committed to coming out, verbally had to come out to people with whom they interacted, which was challenging at times. They thought that it was important to be out for reasons of lesbian visibility, limiting potential misunderstandings, broadening the image of lesbians, and promoting honest relationships. One

entrepreneur would not work for anyone who did not know her sexual orientation, regardless of the financial loss.

> I have to go around saying I'm a lesbian all the time . . . if I didn't people wouldn't know because it [femmeness] is subtle and straight people don't pick up on it . . . So consequently they're oblivious to many many femme women that go around in the world. I make sure that people I work for know I'm a lesbian, mostly before I work for them. I just tell them as soon as I can. (P-04)

Many of the women described this verbal coming out as a particularly femme concern that could be difficult and dangerous at times, although many saw taking the risk as preferable for the community, if not for their own personal benefit.

Most interviewees saw this political work as vital, as they could educate people on a deeper level and challenge the attribution of "difference" ascribed to lesbians. Their feminine appearances made it easier for them first to be known by people who were homophobic and then, afterward, to break down prejudices.

> I get to sneak up on them. It's not so in your face. It's kinda like, "Oh, by the way, I date women." A lot of those people would've been shut right off to me had they known maybe from the beginning that I was different, or a little more masculine, whatever. But this way they couldn't put up their defenses because they had no idea they had to. (P-02)

Ironically, their activism could promote a sense of "lesbian visibility," as by coming out they provided evidence of the many "nonidentifiable" lesbians that may be encountered unknowingly. At the same time, they appreciated Butch political work as broadening the ways femininity can be displayed within heterosexual society, and some reported enjoying the subversiveness of visibly being in a butch–femme couple.

Most of the women interviewed thought that being femme indicated a commitment to live one's life with the integrity to challenge the status quo, both within the lesbian community and without. In social relationships, they saw femmes as the ones to confront others with the complexity of truths, even when they were difficult to hear. Femmes said that they were determined not to change the way they wanted to look, even if others accused them of being apolitical, not-lesbian, or aesthetically unpleasant. One interviewee described her experience of pride: "[I'm] just being me. Being true to myself at last. I'm just now discovering about integrity and pulling all the pieces of me together and being okay with who I am, totally" (P-09). These women had the courage to stand by their personal values of prizing diversity in gender presentation and sexual orientation and to work to be seen and acknowledged in their entirety.

Core Category

The core category is the theme that represents an important motif that runs across the other categories. The core category of the analysis was that of "Maintaining integrity: Upholding beliefs about sexual desire and gender representation." Across many of the themes discussed, femme women were concerned with being recognized for their beliefs within both the culture at large and their personal relationships. The celebration of diversity in gender representation was a central aspect of their femmeness, which integrated their decision to retain a feminine appearance and their conscious structuring of their relationships and social encounters by activist values.

DISCUSSION

An empirically derived model of femme gender has been derived on the basis of modern femme women's descriptions of their identities. This model allows for a greater appreciation of lesbian experience and for an understanding of how gender categories can be constructed within a social community. It also deconstructs a variety of gendered behaviors by attributing contextually based meanings to their performances. In doing so, it exemplifies a subculture in which the enactment of traditional aesthetics of femininity can have a radical meaning. It expands the stereotypes of lesbianism and feminism, and celebrates a powerful feminine aesthetic and sexuality.

Although the participants had diverse geographical origins, ages, socioeconomic classes, and occupations, readers should exercise caution when generalizing findings to other communities. It is important to note that many lesbians or bisexual women who appear feminine do not claim a femme identity and may not share a sense of gender with these participants. Not all femme sexuality is in reference to butch partners, although we stressed the dynamics within this pairing as all but one of the participants described their sexuality within a butch–femme context, which was the dominant form of relational coupling in the community.

The implications of this model of modern femme identity are broad and bring to light the complexity

of gender experiences and identities. Analyses were based on life experiences narrated by femme-lesbians who have reconciled their feminism with a reclaiming of stereotypical feminine beauty and sexuality. Participants described a social system of complex gendered interactions shared by members of their community. The resultant model describes healthy, empowered understandings, and experiences of femme identities and butch–femme relationships, which often are absent from a psychological literature that tends to pathologize difference (see Kitzinger, 1987).

Becoming Visible as Femme

Across the various content areas, the women interviewed discussed the effort to be visible as a femme lesbian. Attemps were impaired by difficulties in describing femme gender so that it could be understood as a gender separate from stereotypical connotations of femininity. An understanding of femme identity within a context of difference is echoed in other narratives of femme experience. For instance, Vaisseau (1995) wrote that "I am not a straight girl; I am femme. There is a *huge* difference" (p. 30).

It can be difficult for those unfamiliar with butch–femme culture to comprehend the difference between heterosexual and femme sexuality and to reinterpret gender signifiers. Butler (1990) succinctly elucidated this point: "Lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time. In both butch and femme identities the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question; indeed, it is precisely that question as it is embodied in these identities that becomes one source of their erotic significance" (p. 123). As gender theorists and psychotherapists (e.g., Levitt & Bigler, 2003) work to understand and develop strategies to promote positive femme-identity, an understanding of differently gendered women's lived experiences becomes of central importance.

In our interviews, women emphasized the differences in the meaning of the same behaviors in heterosexual and butch–femme contexts. These differences were attributed to a basic equality between women, the integration of feminist thought and identity by both partners, a wish to honor partners' genders that typically may be not recognized or valued, and an understanding that gendered behaviors are presented consciously and have political meaning. This social construal of femme identity empowered them and supported their conscious decision to maintain a gender presentation that felt coherent with their sexualities and values.

The Assumption of Privilege

A survey study (Levitt & Horne, 2002) of this same community indicated that femme identities were thought to benefit femme women more than butch identities benefited butch women. Indeed, compared to similar interviews with butch lesbians (Levitt & Hiestand, 2002), femme women reported less heterosexist discrimination and stranger harassment. Still, the ascription of heterosexual privilege to femme women appears inaccurate, even under a cursory examination of this model.

Although they did not experience the regularity of stranger harassment that butch lesbians reported, many participants still experienced personal risk regularly, as their values tended to demand that they come out verbally. This communication entailed unique challenges as they had to face anger, disbelief, or suspicion at times from people who might have avoided them had their lesbianism been apparent. In addition, many femme women reported facing sexist harassment, such as catcalls, come-ons, and sexual comments, which butch women reported more rarely (Levitt & Hiestand, 2002).

Participants described some experiences of rejection within heterosexual cultures for *being* lesbian; they also faced suspicion from some lesbians for not being lesbian-*enough*. As a result, they described experiences of marginalization in both contexts. Some of the women described femme-only gatherings, or support groups, to discuss femme experiences, to support one another, to reinforce their political activism as lesbians, and to celebrate their sexuality together.

Objectification Revisited

In essays on femme-identity, women repeatedly describe how their femmeness influences their sexuality. These writers (e.g., Newman, 1995) often convey a seductive feminine power that is distinct from passivity, but results in others' admiration and desire. This wish to be admired was not described by participants as connected to a lack of self-esteem, but, rather, as a desire to exchange sexual energy. It was through signalling a mutual recognition of gender difference that a sexual appreciation and tension was built. It was partners' distinctly butch gender that was

recognized when femmes allowed them to open doors or to pay on dates. In turn, femme women enjoyed tributes to their femmeness, such as being pleasured sexually, having doors held open, and being complimented or admired.

Participants described a transformed meaning of being the recipient of romantic adoration. By offering themselves as objects for butch gaze alone, femme women took control of their status as such. The admiring subject could only be another woman of her choice. It took a social foundation of equality and a shared valuing of the courage to relinquish the position of the viewer to elect to be the object of another's gaze.

Indeed, butch women have reported (Levitt & Hiestand, 2002) appreciating femme women's comfort in being observed while enacting femininity. Ironically, this ability signaled both the power of beauty and a sense of self or subjectivity confident enough to house the vulnerability of objectivity. Although femme women described aesthetically appraising butch partners as sexual objects, they were cautious not to do so during acts of sexuality, as they did not wish to negate the butch partner's gender identity. This interaction afforded to the butch partner a sense of security that mitigated the vulnerability sometimes associated with sexuality or intimacy.

In being admired then, the femme partner consciously offered the safety of subjectivity to her partner. Femme partners' conscious self-objectification altered the roles of both participants by placing volition, care, and power in the role of the "object.' They did not describe an unexamined etiquette performed between sets of individuals with differing social power, but a conscious adoption of mutually empowering interpersonal rites that was consistent with their feminist values.

Throughout these interviews, women relayed the formation of interpersonal dynamics that prized diversity in gender presentation and sexuality, and was guided by values of respect and equality. These considerations were at play within friendships and romances and were evidenced within both lesbian and heterosexual contexts. The core of femme relating appeared to be a process of structuring relationships so that they incorporate care for others' vulnerabilities with a sense of personal integrity.

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